the unit at work. Case conferences are held on Wednesdays from 11.30 a.m. (Telephone: ALPerton 1451.) Visitors to the unit will see what very practical help it can offer the doctor in rescuing the lame and the unwilling from what Richard Steele called "the insupportable labour of doing nothing."

Nova et Vetera

"BY THE VISITATION OF GOD"

THE DEATH OF JOHN WILLIAM POLIDORI, M.D., IN 1821

BY

HENRY R. VIETS, M.D.

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The circumstances surrounding the sudden death of John William Polidori (M.D. Edin., 1815) at his father's house, 38 Great Pulteney, London, on Friday, August 24, 1821, has until recently remained unclear and the exact cause of death a subject of speculation. Was it suicide at the age of 25, as thought by his family, that brought to an end a promising career in this handsome and talented young man, who had been Lord Byron's travelling physician only five years before?

The following statement, presumably supplied by his father, was published posthumously as an appendix to Polidori's last book, *The Fall of the Angels, A Sacred Poem* (London, John Warren, 1821).[1]

"DR. POLIDORI, after an absence of about three weeks from London, returned the 20th of last August, looking very ill, to his Father's house. He complained of frequent loss of sight, and a pain in his side. On the 24th ensuing, late in the morning, MR. POLIDORI'S servant, not seeing him come out of his room, entered it, and found him in the agonies of death. Medical assistance was procured, but it was too late: he died soon after. His Father, who was in the country, arrived a few hours after the melancholy event, to hear the dreadful and unexpected news of the premature death of a beloved son at the age of five-and-twenty.

"A Coroner's Inquest was held on the ensuing evening, in the presence of a respectable Jury, composed of about twenty persons, who returned a verdict of *Died by the Visitation of God.*

"The rest of MR. POLIDORI'S family, who were all in the country, having returned directly, accompanied the deceased on the 29th to his grave, in the Churchyard of St. Pancras, where his afflicted parent intends to erect a stone with the following inscription:

JOANNIS GULIELMI POLIDORI
M.D.
QUOD MORTALE ERAT
HIC SITUM EST.
OBIIT IX. KAL. SEPT.
A.D.
MDCCCXXI.
AETATIS XXV.
PATER MOERENS
DILECTISSIMO FILIO
HOC MONUMENTUM POSUIT."

The coroner's inquest mentioned in the account was held on Saturday night, August 25, more than 24 hours after death, at his father's house. The jury returned a verdict of "Died by the Visitation of God," thus allowing the body, because of the finding of "natural death," to be buried on August 29 in St. Pancras Churchyard, London, a frequent resting-place for Roman Catholics. Whether or not the stone described in the statement was ever erected cannot now be determined. Owing to a partial destruction of the burial ground, no trace of the grave can be found (1960). The burial, however, is recorded in the St. Pancras Church Register, with the correct name, address, age, and date.[2]

The story might well end at this point, except for some uncertainty in regard to exactly what happened on Friday morning, August 24, and the manner of reaching the favourable verdict by the coroner and his jury. The coroner's records, fortunately, are still available, preserved among the muniments at Westminster Abbey.[3] These documents throw light not only on the exact nature of Polidori's death but also on the method of conducting a coroner's court in the City and Liberty of Westminster in the County of Middlesex in 1821.

The Coroner's Jury

The coroner, John Henry Gell, Esquire, issued a warrant on August 25, the morning after Polidori's death, "for Jury on John Polidori" on the usual printed form for the City and Liberty of Westminster, in the County of Middlesex. It was addressed "To the Constables of the Parish of Saint James within the said Liberty of Westminster."

The hand-written list of the 24 prospective jurors, with names and addresses, is attached to the warrant. The men all lived in the Golden Square region of Soho, seven in Great Pulteney Street itself, where Polidori died. and the other in the immediate neighbourhood.[4] One lived in Golden Square and another in Marlborough Row; none were more than a quarter of a mile from the home of Professor Guitano Polidori at 38 Great Pulteney Street, where the inquest was held at 7 p.m.

The body of John Polidori was viewed, "he then and there lying dead." Witnesses were then heard: first, the two surgeons who had responded to the hurried calls on Friday noon, and, secondly, two residents of the house.

The first witness was Thomas Copeland of Golden Square, surgeon, who deposed on oath:

> "Yesterday about one o'clock I was suddenly called. I went immediately and found the deceased in a front Room on the first floor of this House. He was dressed —he was perfectly senseless and in a dying state. I attempted to discharge the contents of the stomach but ineffectually. He died (I believe) ten minutes after.
>
> [signed] Tho. Copeland."

Thomas Copeland (1781–1855), 40 years of age, had studied at St. Bartholomew's Hospital and qualified as a surgeon in 1804. By 1821 he was an eminent practitioner in London and had already published his pioneer work on diseases of the rectum (1810). He lived only two streets away from the Polidori's at 4 Golden Square. There is no note that he was questioned regarding the cause of death.

The second witness, William Davies, of 59 Poland Street, also a surgeon, testified:

> "I was suddenly called yesterday between 12 and 1 o'clock. I went immediately and found the deceased in the front Room of the first floor of this House—he was in Bed there—He was dead.
>
> [signed] Will[m]. Davies."

William Davies has not been further identified.

Of somewhat more value is the sworn testimony of the two other witnesses. First came the servant of the household, Charlotte Reed:

> "I am servant here to Mr. Guitano Polidori, the Father of the deceased. The deceased at the time of his death

was aged about six & twenty years. He resided in this House. He has not been very well in health lately. He returned from Brighton on Monday last [August 20]. He did not then seem as heretofore in his behaviour for he then spoke quick & short. Before he went to Brighton he did not appear well in his health. And since his return he has ordered his dinner in such a way as he was not used to do. He dined on Thursday last [August 23] with a Gentleman [John Deagostini] up stairs in this House. He was not in good spirits in the Evening of that day. I saw him about 9 that night. He asked me to leave a Glass (a Tumbler) in his Room. This was not usual, but I left one. He told me he was not well & if he was not up by 12 next day I was not to call him. I went to his room about 10 minutes before 12 to open the shutters. I opened them. As I was returning back I saw he looked very ill. He was in Bed and undressed. He lay in a common position. I soon left the room & told the Gentleman up stairs, who came down stairs immediately. I afterwards went for medical assistance.

[signed] Charlotte Reed."

Finally comes a statement of greater importance, from the roomer upstairs, John Deagostini,[5] who had been quickly called by Charlotte Reed.

"The deceased dined with me in this House last Thursday [August 23]. He accepted my invitation in an abrupt way. This had been usual with him for some time and for the last 2 years when he had an accident & was thrown from his Gig and hurt on the head. He spoke on Thursday in half sentences in conversing on politics & future time. He said I should see more than him. This was said in a very harsh way, before he left Table & shook the Gentleman in our company by the hand so violently that it forced him to kneel. The deceased appeared deranged in his mind and his countenance haggard. He ate but little at Dinner. We parted but he joined us again at Tea when he hardly spoke a word. He left us about 9 that night. Next day [August 24] after Breakfast I enquired of the Maid if he had gone out. She replied No & that he had desired her not to call him. She came up to me much alarmed about 12. I went down immediately into his Room. There was a Tumbler on the chair. This contained only water. I did not observe in the room the remains of any deleterious substance. He was senseless and apparently in a dying state. Dr. Copeland drank part of the water in the Tumbler.

[signed] John Deagostini."

The testimony of the four witnesses, written by the clerk but signed by each, ended the inquest. There is no indication of a post-mortem examination or an investigation of the material agents, such as the tumbler. The possibility of poison in the room where Polidori died was not, so far as the record shows, given consideration, except for the observation of Deagostini. The verdict was that "the said John Polidori . . . departed this Life in a natural way by the visitation of God." The document is signed by J. H. Gell, Coroner, and all twelve jurors.

The Question of Suicide

The judgment of the coroner's jury was decisive. The death, pronounced in unmistakable terms, was a "natural one." But the family, both at the time and later, considered otherwise. His nephew, William Michael Rossetti, editing Polidori's *Diary* nearly one hundred years later,[6] wrote: "In August 1821 he [Polidori] committed suicide with poison—having, through losses in gambling, incurred a debt of honour which he had no present means of clearing off. That he did take poison, prussic acid, was a fact perfectly well known in his family; but it is curious to note that the easy-going and good-naturedly disposed coroner's jury were content to return a verdict without eliciting any distinct evidence as to the cause of death, and they simply pronounced that he had 'died by the visitation of God.'"

One notes, however, that no mention of prussic acid occurs in the dispositions by the doctors, and, if Deagostini's statement can be taken as truthful, Dr. Copeland actually drank part of the water in the tumbler left sitting on the chair beside the dead Polidori. Such an act would appear foolhardy if Copeland, a man of substance, considered the tumbler had contained a rapidly acting deadly poison. This act confirmed Deagostini's testimony that the tumbler "contained only water." In this exchange one glimpses the idea that suicide was naturally suspected from the condition of the dying or dead man, but Copeland, a most competent observer, dismissed the idea, at least so far as the tumbler was concerned.

Copeland states, in addition, that Polidori died ten minutes after he was first seen by him, about one o'clock or shortly after. As Charlotte Reed, the servant, had found him "very ill" at ten minutes before twelve and Deagostini reported him "senseless and apparently in a dying state" a few minutes later, if prussic acid had been taken it would be surprising for Copeland to have found him still living an hour or more after Charlotte Reed's discovery. Prussic acid seems an unlikely agent if suicide was attempted. Some other, more slowly acting poison may of course have been used. But it is at least uncertain that any form of poisoning was the cause of death. Indeed, there is some evidence that symptoms of nervous instability had existed for a year or longer, possibly of importance in evaluating the terminal event.

Deagostini, living in the same house with Polidori, had noted some abruptness of speech occurring subsequent to an injury two years before death, when the young doctor was thrown from his gig and was "hurt on the head." Such a behavioural change might well have been a sequel to cerebral trauma.

A harsh way of speech, "in half sentences," violent actions, and a haggard countenance, were also noted by Deagostini as more immediate symptoms the night before death. Polidori ate little at noon and hardly spoke a word at tea before he retired to his room at nine. And yet Deagostini could not have suspected impending suicide, for he expected Polidori to leave the house by himself the next morning, and indeed inquired of the maid at breakfast if he had done so.

The maid, too, had noted some change in Polidori. He had "not been very well in health lately," and when

[1] Another edition by the same publisher, but without Polidori's name, was issued before his death in 1821. The posthumous edition has Polidori's name on the title-page, and carries the death notice and a list of his published works.

[2] By courtesy of Mr. K. S. Gladstone, Acting Vestry Clerk, St. Pancras Church, who searched the records for me (1960).

[3] The coroner's inquest reports were made available to me through the kindness of Mr. Lawrence Edward Tanner, Librarian, Westminster Abbey Library, London.

[4] R. Horwood, *Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster . . . shewing Every House*. London, 1792-9.

[5] John Deagostini, a scholar and family friend, lived in an apartment on the upper floor of the Polidori house. John Polidori dedicated his M.D. Edinburgh thesis (1815) to him.

[6] *The Diary of Dr. John William Polidori, 1816, Relating to Byron, Shelley, etc* Edited and elucidated by William Michael Rossetti. Elkin Mathews, London, 1911.

he returned from Brighton on August 20 "he did not then seem as heretofore in his behaviour for he then spoke quick and short." Even before he went to Brighton her master's son had not appeared to her "well in his health." He ordered his dinner in an unusual manner and actually told the maid that he was not well and did not expect to be up before noon of the following day. If suicide was being considered by Polidori when he retired one would have expected, moreover, the attempt to have taken place at the usual time, the early morning hours, and not postponed until noon.

Was he dead when found? The maid reported he "looked very ill" at ten minutes to twelve. She does not say he was dead. Deagostini, a few minutes later, found him "senseless and apparently in a dying state," but presumably not dead. When Copeland arrived, probably an hour later, he found Polidori "senseless and in a dying state." He certainly was not dead, for Copeland "attempted to discharge the contents of the stomach," an action he would not have done on a dead body. But Copeland was even more definite in his testimony when he stated: "He died (I believe) ten minutes after." By "after" I presume he meant ten minutes following the attempt at emesis, but there seems some doubt in his mind as to the exact time. The important point is he found Polidori alive. If the maid ran to Copeland's house on Golden Square and the doctor came back with her on the run, the elapsed time can hardly have been less than a half-hour, perhaps longer. Such an interval of time is inconsistent with prussic acid as the cause of death.

Polidori's death notice was reported in *The Traveller* (London) on Monday evening, August 27, 1821,[6] but the report on the inquest was not published until September 11 in the *Morning Chronicle, The Courier,* and the *New Times.* Each of the inquest newspaper accounts refers to the coroner, for some unknown reason, as T. Higgs, not J. H. Gell, who actually signed the document.

One can only conclude, therefore, that the verdict of the coroner and his jury was justified. Suicide, by prussic acid or other means, was "not proven." There is no evidence in the documents of the coroner's inquest to uphold the validity of the statement by Polidori's nephew, William Michael Rossetti, that the young physician did take a poison to end his life.

A BIOGRAPHICAL VALHALLA

This new volume of *The Dictionary of National Biography** records the lives of 725 men and women who died in the decade 1941 to 1950. The contributors are writers of distinction and for the most part have personal knowledge of the person commemorated. The editors have ably performed a difficult task, and, though omissions will be noted, few will criticize those chosen for admission to this biographical Valhalla.

Here the medical profession receives a due share of posthumous honour. Of the 13 physicians, the doyen, Sir Thomas Barlow, who died in his hundredth year, heads the list. Then comes Sir Farquhar Buzzard, neurologist and regius professor, who saw Oxford medicine expand into a clinical school through the munificence of Lord Nuffield. The life of Lord Dawson of Penn, the statesman of medicine, is ably recorded by his daughter, Lady Eccles. Next come Sir William Hale-White; Sir Thomas Lewis, the famous cardiologist; Sir Walter Langdon-Brown; Sir Thomas Oliver, an authority on industrial hygiene; Sir Humphry Rolleston, clinician, pathologist, and medical historian; John Ryle, a great clinician and a pioneer in social medicine; and Sir Frederic Still, the first to specialize in children's diseases and the discoverer of Still's disease. With him ranks another eminent paediatrician, Sir Leonard Parsons, of Birmingham. Sir William Willcox, who combined medicine with toxicology, is aptly described as "the most deliberate and painstaking expert witness," and Warrington Yorke is renowned for his work in tropical medicine.

The casualty list of pathologists and bacteriologists is also a heavy one. Here are lives of Sir Joseph Arkwright, who made fundamental researches on bacteriological variation; William Bulloch, bacteriologist, pathologist, and medical historian; Sir John Ledingham, whose researches advanced knowledge of bacteriology, pathology, haematology, immunology, and virus diseases; Sir Bernard Spilsbury, "the leading detective-pathologist of the day"; Professor Topley, a brilliant investigator; and, last but not least, Sir Almroth Wright, who ranks, says his biographer, Leonard Colebrook, "with Pasteur, Ehrlich and Metchnikoff among the founders of modern immunology."

The surgeons were also men of fame. There are those two great pioneers in orthopaedic surgery, Sir Henry Gauvain and G. R. Girdlestone; Sir D'Arcy Power, whose work as a medical historian went hand-in-hand with surgical skill; Sir Harold Stiles, of Edinburgh; Sir Cuthbert Wallace, whose surgical knowledge was employed in the South African War and in two world wars; and Sir William Wheeler, the Irish surgeon, a brilliant operator.

Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins explored the chemistry of intermediate metabolism and established biochemistry as a separate discipline. Three dermatologists may be mentioned. Of these J. H. Sequeira introduced Finsen light treatment into England; Sir Norman Walker was also an administrator and an able president of the General Medical Council; Sir Ernest Graham-Little, after establishing an international reputation in dermatology, represented London University in Parliament. Physiology is personified by Sir Frederick Banting, whose discovery of insulin with Best is recorded by Best himself; and by Sir Joseph Barcroft, famous for his work on haemoglobin, respiration, and other problems. Sir Arthur Newsholme, medical officer of the Local Government Board; Sir George Newman, chief medical officer of the Ministry of Health and Board of Education; and Sir Frederick Menzies, chief medical officer of the London County Council, contributed their gifts to administration and progress in the field of public health.

C. S. Myers illuminated experimental psychology, and two alienists of distinction, Sir Hubert Bond, of the Board of Control, and Sir Robert Armstrong-Jones, are also here. The late Sir Drummond Shiels has written a sympathetic account of a general practitioner, H. A. Moody, a Jamaican practising in Peckham, who founded the League of Coloured Peoples.

Other lives also will interest medical readers. Tom Jones's studies of Earl Baldwin and Earl Lloyd-George are superb. Under John Burns and Sir Horace Monro the national tuberculosis and child welfare services were organized by Newsholme. C. S. Gibbon did much for housing and public health. Sir Arthur Robinson, of the Ministry of Health, planned the Local Government Act of 1929, which at long last achieved poor-law reform. Sir Malcolm Delevigne, of the Home Office, is memorable for his crusade against too-easy facilities for drug addiction and for subsequent legislation on the subject. Mrs. Bedford Fenwick and Dame Rosalind Paget were pioneers in nursing reform. Sir Herbert Barker, manipulative surgeon (unqualified), is not forgotten. Those interested in zoology will appreciate the lives of Sir D'Arcy Thompson, Sir Edward Poulton, and that modest genius Professor E. S. Goodrich. This volume of the *D.N.B.* well maintains the high standard of its immediate predecessors.

**The Dictionary of National Biography, 1941–1950.* Edited by L. G. Wickham Legg and E. T. Williams. (Pp. 1,031+xxi. £5 5s.) Oxford University Press. 1959.